BECOMING EVIL

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BECOMING EVIL

How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing

Second Edition

JAMES WALLER

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To the memory
of the more than 60 million men, women, and children
who were victims of genocide and mass killing
in the past century

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FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

by Gregory H. Stanton

The great Catholic monk and poet Thomas Merton once wrote that labeling the Nazi killers as insane or inherently evil wrongly permits us the comfort of believing that normal, ordinary people could never commit the crimes they committed. The real horror, as Merton observed, is that most perpetrators of genocide are neither insane nor pathologically cruel. They are people like us.

James Waller's book brilliantly explores how ordinary people can do great evil. Waller draws upon his deep understanding of the findings of modern social psychology to present a complex analysis of the processes that can bring "ordinary men," as Christopher Browning called them in his path-breaking book, to commit mass murder. The second edition of Waller's book has added recent studies of human behavior that bear on these processes and has fine-tuned his multifactoral model.

Among the least productive explanations for genocide are unicausal models that present genocide as the result of rational calculation by evil political leaders (which fail to explain the irrational racism of the leaders), as the result of Malthusian population pressures (which fail to explain antigenocidal societies like the Netherlands, Singapore, and Hong Kong), as the result of modern totalitarianism (which fail to explain the multitude of genocides before the modern age of totalitarianism), or as the expression of

innate human aggression (which fail to explain the rise of modern democracies that have thus far defeated or outlasted most genocidal regimes, though too late to save the lives of millions of people).

James Waller presents genocide as the result of a multitude of processes that are present in nonvirulent forms in all societies but that grow out of their normal social and psychological limits and metastasize into the social pathology of genocide.

Waller starts from the simple observation that for a million people to be killed, many thousands of people must do the killing. In the Rwandan genocide, the number of perpetrators may have even exceeded a hundred thousand. He also notes that at one time or another, nearly every society, including our own, has committed genocide against one or more groups.

There are three ways this book is more useful than other accounts of this common human pathology. First, it sees human life as process. Waller is not content with statistical correlations of factors that might predispose one society more toward genocide than another. Statistical models, the darling of psychologists, sociologists, economists, and political scientists, may indicate correlations and probabilities. But they can no more describe the process of genocide than statistical genetics could explain Watson and Crick's RNA-DNA double helix or the creative structure of the genome.

Second, Waller is not afraid to take on the big questions that most social scientists and philosophers have stopped asking: What is human nature? What is evil? Waller argues that there is a moral law in every human society that is embedded in the human conscience. That moral law is the absolute standard against which all human behavior must be judged. It is the reason that genocide is not just a relative choice, but absolutely evil. Genocide idolizes one national, ethnic, racial, or religious group and treats the "other" as subhuman. It denies the moral fact that we are all members of the same race—the human race.

Third, and most important for those of us working to prevent genocide, Waller's account of the forces and processes that result in genocide suggests ways that we might counter those forces and processes. The ethnocentrism we are all born into because we are born into a particular culture can be transcended through education and laws for tolerance and pluralism. People can be taught to resist the moral disengagement of euphemisms like "ethnic cleansing," a term that should be struck from the English language just as surely as *Judenrein* has been struck from culturally acceptable German. They can be taught to disobey and resist the culture of cruelty. (Nevertheless, posting the Geneva Conventions, those codifications of universal moral

law, on every pillar in every barracks at Parris Island has not prevented a few U.S. Marines from committing war crimes.) Religious leaders can push back against fundamentalism and other totalitarian idolatries. And above all, people can be made aware of the humanity of the "others," through media coverage of stories that humanize them and through personal contact that brings human cultures together.

Ultimately, genocide is caused by depersonalization, by ignoring the personhood of the "other." It is no accident that the captives at Auschwitz-Birkenau were tattooed with numbers. Or that Khmer Rouge leaders in Cambodia even referred to each other with numbers: Brother Number One, Brother Number Two, and so on.

James Waller provides a map of the many routes to depersonalization. His book also shows paths to the prevention of racism, genocide, and war—the repersonalization of the "others." He stands in the great tradition of Martin Luther King Jr. and Pope John Paul II. Both were personalists. Both believed that evil is not the most powerful force in the world; that love is. Genocide will not triumph; justice will. James Waller's book is an important contribution to the international campaign to end genocide.

Gregory H. Stanton is the President of Genocide Watch and is the James Farmer Professor of Human Rights at the University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Virginia.

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FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

by Christopher R. Browning

The Holocaust was a man-made event, as have been the many other acts of genocide and mass killing that stain our history. Indeed, one of the most haunting questions that these acts of mass killing pose to us all is, quite simply, "How were they humanly possible?" When confronting the awesome task of trying to explain the behavior of the genocidal perpetrators, however, scholars have not reached any consensus. One group of answers to that inevitable question has focused on particularities. What culture, society, or nation, what ideology, historical prejudice, or ethnic hatred, what psychological profile or cluster of personality traits, what unusual situation or special circumstance is to be deemed the cause of such aberrant human behavior? The underlying assumption to this approach is that there is a fatal flaw, a major deviation from the norm, that must be discovered to account for it.

Given that most societies do not commit genocide and most people do not become genocidal killers, there is an intuitive common sense to such an approach. If "extraordinary evil" is not the norm either historically or in our everyday experience, then its source must be found in some abnormality particular to those peoples and societies that do perpetrate "extraordinary evil." Such a commonsense assumption is also comforting. We look for flaws in others, not latent potentials within ourselves. For surely "we" and "our" society could not do what the perpetrators and their societies have done.

There is a second approach, the one embraced by James Waller in this book, that takes as its starting point the challenge of understanding how on occasion "ordinary" people have committed "extraordinary evil." What basic aspects of human nature and tendencies of individual behavior, what commonplace mechanisms of social interaction, both within groups and between in-groups and out-groups, have on occasion come together with the fatal consequence that large numbers of ordinary people become genocidal perpetrators? The explanations that result from such an approach are inherently both universalistic and multicausal.

That many of the perpetrators of "extraordinary evil" were not exceptional people is not, of course, a new discovery. More than four decades ago, Raul Hilberg noted that the Holocaust perpetrators were drawn from a cross section of German society. And the crux of Adolf Eichmann's defense strategy was the attempt to disguise his own career as that of a minor cog in the machinery of destruction. Hannah Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," derived from her observation of the Eichmann trial, has proved more durable than her conclusions about her star example. One decade ago I dubbed the killers of Reserve Police Battalion 101 "ordinary men." However, insofar as I attempted to bolster my empirically based study with conceptions and insights from social psychology, I made use of findings that dated mostly from the 1960s, especially the classic experiments of Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo.

In recent years there has been another surge of interest by social and now evolutionary psychologists in studies relevant to understanding how "ordinary" people commit "extraordinary evil." One of the great merits of James Waller's book is that he provides invaluable summaries of this new research for scholars who wish to make use of such insights but whose own expertise lies elsewhere. Moreover, Waller's synthesis organizes these findings into an overall model that allows others to see just where these different findings fit into the major categories of explanation. Even those of us who have long advocated multicausal interpretations based on multidisciplinary scholarship can quickly see how partial and incomplete our previous attempts have been. James Waller expresses the modest hope that his model will stimulate further discussion. I think it is destined to be one of the foundations upon which further scholarship is based.

Christopher R. Browning is Frank Porter Graham Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

PREFACE

"I Couldn't Do This to Someone"

June 1999. A small hillside village in southern Kosovo. Its name is Dobrodeljane, and it was home to hundreds of ethnic Albanians. It has been a virtual ghost town since March 25, the day after the NATO air strikes began. Now, nearly a month later, a few families return to claim bodies and possessions. One family claims two bodies—one shot in the head, another with a pitchfork in the gut and a missing leg. Every one of Dobrodeljane's 170 houses has been destroyed or heavily damaged. Most were trashed by police and soldiers, who used them, then looted them and set them ablaze. There is no electricity or water. The shops are empty, and stockpiles of food have been burned.

Sadri Sikaqi, sixty-five, and his wife Mihrie, sixty-two, pick over the ruins of their home, which they had rebuilt after their first house was destroyed in a battle between Serbian militiamen and ethnic Albanian guerrillas the previous August. More than a decade of repression has culminated in a three-month killing spree by the Yugoslav army and Serbian security forces. With this has come the expulsion and displacement of more than 855,000 people—most of whom are ethnic Albanians—forced to flee Kosovo in fear of their lives. Today, the immediacy of the threat is over. In its place, though, is the aftertaste of a world gone mad. How do we explain the existence, and persistence, of extraordinary human evil? What type of people could do this?

Sikaqi, standing at the living room window with a view of his razed village, the concrete walls burned black, the bodies buried in the rubble, offers his own answer. "Only people who aren't human could do this. I couldn't do this to someone."[1]

Unfortunately, history is littered with examples of people who *could* do this to someone and *did.* According to Jewish-Christian tradition, the first time that death appeared in the world, it was murder: Cain slew Abel. "Two men," says Elie Wiesel, perhaps the most widely read writer on the Holocaust, "and one of them became a killer."[2] The book of Genesis goes on to record that Cain was banished from Eden. He subsequently founded our first city—in the land of Nod, east of Eden—and named it Enoch, after his firstborn son. Through Enoch, Cain's line continued and prospered. Thousands of years later, we all can be considered the children of Cain. At the very least, we bear the taint of the violent legacy he ushered into the world when he killed his brother.

Throughout human history, social conflict is ubiquitous. Wars erupt naturally everywhere humans are present. As Winston Churchill said, "The story of the human race is war. Except for brief and precarious interludes there has never been peace in the world; and long before history began murderous strife was universal and unending."[3] Since the Napoleonic Wars, we have fought an average of six international wars and six civil wars per *decade.* On average, three high-fatality struggles have been in action somewhere in the world at any moment since 1900. The four decades after the end of World War II saw 150 wars, involving more than 60 member states of the United Nations, and only 26 days of world peace—and that does not even include the innumerable internal wars and police actions. Buried in the midst of all of our progress in the twentieth century are well over 100 million persons who met a violent death at the hands of their fellow human beings in wars and conflicts. That is more than five times the number from the nineteenth century and more than ten times the number from the eighteenth century.[4]

Michael Ghiglieri, an anthropologist at the University of Northern Arizona, even contends that war vies with sex for the distinction of being the most significant process in human evolution. "Not only have wars shaped geopolitical boundaries and spread national ideologies," he writes, "but they also have carved the distributions of humanity's religions, cultures, diseases, technologies, and even genetic populations."[5]

There is no sign that we are on an ascendant trajectory out of the shadow of our work of decreation. Today, while the number of armed conflicts around

the world has purportedly decreased, more than a quarter of the world's 193 nations still remain embroiled in conflict—a statistic that actually *under*-estimates global violence because it only includes state-to-state conflicts or internal state conflicts while omitting asymmetrical conflicts, such as terrorist activity. The bipolar Cold War system has disintegrated into a system of "warm wars," with randomized conflicts popping up in all corners of an interdependent world. Army ret. maj. Andy Messing Jr., executive director of the conservative-oriented National Defense Council Foundation, warns that the growing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and an increasing world population only add to the danger. In his words, "It's going to be a very tough next 20 years."[6] Even more liberal-leaning voices recognize that present-day population growth, unequal distribution of land and energy resources, and per capita consumption cannot be sustained without leading to even more catastrophic human conflict.

The greatest catastrophes occur when the distinctions between war and crime fade; when there is dissolution of the boundaries between military and criminal conduct, between civility and barbarity; when political, social, or religious groups embrace collective violence against a defenseless victim group as warfare or, perhaps worse yet, as "progress." Such acts are human evil writ large.

The dawn of the twenty-first century brings little light to the darkness. Since 1999, Russian armed forces have escalated their use of extortion, torture, violence, and murder against Chechen civilians; a wave of massacres in the early months of 2002 targeted Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat; at the close of 2003, Ethiopian government troops and local militia slaughtered more than 400 people of the Anuak tribe in the Gambella region of western Ethiopia. In Darfur, the western region of Sudan, at least 400,000 people have died as a result of a Sudanese government–sponsored campaign of violence and forced starvation that began in early 2003. Clearly, despite the end of the colonial era and the dismantling of the Cold War, the persistence of inhumanity in human affairs is incontrovertible. I am speaking here not of isolated executions but of wholesale slaughters. As collectives, we engage in acts of extraordinary evil, with apparent moral calm and intensity of supposed purpose, which could only be described as insane were they committed by an individual. How do we explain the extraordinary evil that we perpetrate on each other in the name of our country, race, ethnicity, political party, or god?

Professionally, these questions fall within the realm of what I do. I am a social psychologist. I work in a fascinating field that explores how our

thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by our interactions with other people. Take a course in social psychology and you will study how "social loafing" seduces a group of twelve to produce work equivalent to a group of six; how your choice of the shirt or slacks you wore today was influenced by implicit, and explicit, pressures to conform; how the faulty group decision making that led to the *Challenger* disaster could have been avoided; why you married the person you married and why you may, or may not, regret that choice; why thirty-eight residents stood by and did nothing while a young woman named Kitty Genovese was assaulted, and eventually murdered, outside an apartment building in New York City in 1964.

In this incredibly rich field, I have been most drawn to understanding how we "misrelate" to each other. What are the psychological dynamics of why we hate and exclude others simply because of what they look like, where they come from, or what they believe? This puts me in the arena of "-isms"—sexism, ageism, antisemitism, ableism (prejudice against disabled people), and fatism (prejudice against overweight people). My first two books each dealt with the particular "-ism" of race—*Face to Face: The Changing State of Racism across America* and *Prejudice across America*.[7] The question of how ordinary people come to commit extraordinary evil is an extension of my professional interests in human "misrelation" and has spurred my involvement in the field of Holocaust and genocide studies.

Personally, these questions fall within the deeper realm of *who* I am. At this level, these are not questions that I can distance myself from by objectifying them in someone or something else. Rather, these are questions about *my* fundamental human nature. Who am I and of what am I capable? Rather than dispassionately looking at someone else and asking "How could they?," I am compelled to look at myself and ask "Could I?" Could I be capable of such brutal inhumanity? Could you? If so, what does that say about the nature of human nature and the future of how we should live together? These are the ultimate questions that—as we seek to answer them—make it impossible for us to ever think the same again about societies, other human beings, and ourselves.

How important is the problem of ordinary people committing extraordinary evil? If we use the number of deaths as the basis for assigning importance, it can be argued that there is no more pressing problem facing humans today. Certainly, this problem poses much more than a distant sense of random menace to us. In every corner of the world, it strikes home too closely and far too frequently to be marginalized. The millions of victims

of mass killing and genocide do not make a choice to endanger or end their lives. They are "victims" in the truest sense of the word. Understanding their victimization, and the people who perpetrated it, is one of the most central and compelling issues facing humankind.

Rather than another descriptive catalog of the atrocities we perpetrate on each other, we stand much more in need of explanation and understanding. How do people come to commit genocide and mass killing? In the pages that follow, I will outline an explanation that considers the wide range of factors involved in the process of ordinary people coming to commit extraordinary evil. This explanatory model, drawing on case studies of perpetrator behavior from an atrocious litany of genocides and mass killings, is not an invocation of a single broad-brush psychological state. Rather, it is a detailed analysis of the influences that help shape our responses to authority and unleash our destructive capacities.

To offer a psychological explanation for the atrocities committed by perpetrators is not to forgive, justify, or condone their behaviors. Instead, the explanation simply allows us to understand the conditions under which many of us could be transformed into killing machines. When we understand the ordinariness of extraordinary evil, we will be less surprised by evil, less likely to be unwitting contributors to evil, and perhaps better equipped to forestall evil. Ultimately, being aware of our own capacity for evil—and the cultural, psychological, and social constructions that foster it—is the best safeguard we can have against future genocides and mass killings. It is the pursuit of that awareness, and of what we can do to cultivate the moral sensibilities to curb extraordinary human evil, which drives me to write this book.

This second edition is completely revised and updated. It is *revised* in the sense that the explanatory model developed in the first edition has been substantially reconfigured based on reader comments and reviews. The model has been simplified and is now built around three proximate constructions—the cultural construction of worldview, the psychological construction of the "other," and the social construction of cruelty—that converge interactively to impact individual behavior in situations of collective violence. Each of the three constructions is grounded in more distant, ultimate influences—flowing from the deep evolutionary streams of human nature—giving us a more thorough understanding of how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing. Readers from the first edition will recognize some familiar (though repackaged) components from the first model but will also be introduced to some new components (for example, kin recognition cues). Hopefully, these

changes will increase the explanatory power of the model (still far from mature) as well as give more cogent direction for future research.

This second edition is *updated* in the sense that nearly one-third of the references are new, a reflection of the tremendous pace of related scholarship in Holocaust and genocide studies. I've also used emerging lines of research from a wide variety of disciplines—and a greater selection of case studies of genocides and mass killing—to expand the analysis and application of the model. The issue of gender, for instance, relegated to a footnote in the first edition, now occupies a prominent place in the discussion of the social construction of cruelty. Information on the current struggles, and successes, of postgenocidal societies discussed in the eyewitness accounts also has been updated. Finally, readers will note a completely revised final chapter as well as the inclusion of a postscript on current outbreaks of genocide and mass killing—leaving us with the unsettling recognition that we are dealing with a problem whose time has not yet passed and perhaps never will.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of the many joys of finishing a book—in addition to getting on with one's life—is the opportunity to thank the people without whom the book would not have been written. As always, I have benefited from the gracious support of my colleagues in the Department of Psychology at Whitworth College—Noel Wescombe, Adrian Teo, and Noelle Wiersma. Beyond their collegial support, each of them also offered invaluable comments on select chapters. Other friends who gave of their time in shaping the content and voice of the book were Israel Charny, Henry Greenspan, Jennifer Hammer, David Holt, Heather Ann Looy, Michael Peterson, Jack Robinson, Julia Stronks, and John Yoder. A special note of thanks also to Tammy Reid and the academic affairs office at Whitworth College for their financial support in securing the photographs included in this book. My indebtedness to the work of a community of scholars, too numerous to list here, is apparent from the chapter notes.

I also want to thank Bill Robinson for encouraging me to continue to take risks as a teacher-scholar at a time in my career when I had become hesitant to do so. A special note of appreciation is due the outside readers—Stephen Haynes and David Myers—and two anonymous readers from Oxford University Press. Thanks also go to Kathy Fechter, Gail Fielding, Kristie Kopp, Andrea LeGore, and Rebekah Nelson, who helped in a myriad

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Throughout the writing of the book, I have benefited from several opportunities to present my work as it was evolving and have it shaped by feedback from colleagues near and far. These included a Faculty Scholarship Forum (December 1999) and Showcase presentation (March 2001) at Whitworth; professional presentations at the Thirtieth Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches (March 2000) and the Lessons and Legacies conference sponsored by the Holocaust Educational Foundation (November 2000); local presentations at the Anne Frank Exhibit (May 2000) and as a featured speaker at Yom Hashoa at Spokane's Temple Beth Shalom (April 2001); and an invited presentation at a conference on human nature sponsored by the Weyerhaeuser Center for Christian Faith and Learning at Whitworth College (July 2001).

Two other special learning opportunities deserve mention and thanks. In June 1999, I was a participant in the First Annual Seminar for Faculty Teaching Holocaust Courses, sponsored by the University Programs Division of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. The three-week seminar was taught by the world-renowned Holocaust scholar Raul Hilberg, professor emeritus at the University of Vermont. The precision and rigor he brings to his scholarship were inspiring, as were the commitment and passion evidenced by the other twenty-two participants in the seminar. Also, a special thanks to Ron Kurpiers, librarian at the USHMM, whose gracious spirit made the museum library a wonderful place of reflection as well as research.

In November 1999, with the support of my college president, Bill Rob-

inson, I was able to visit—for the first time—Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, on the Mount of Remembrance in Jerusalem, Israel. The overwhelming power of that memorial came at a critical juncture when I needed to have faces brought back to the victims of mass killing and genocide that were beginning to become only dots and lines on the screen of my computer.

Thanks also go to Joan Bossert, Mia McIver, Kim Robinson, Christi Stanforth, and the wonderful staff at Oxford University Press who first saw a vision for my manuscript and worked diligently and professionally to turn it into a book.

Writing about perpetrators of extraordinary human evil was made more deeply personal and even more painful whenever I looked into the eyes of my three children. At the same time, however, their smiles, laughter, and love made me even more grateful and happy to return to their world after I left my keyboard. So, Brennan, Hannah, and Noah, thank you for being a rainbow of realistic hope at the many times when goodness seemed so far away from me as I immersed myself in an impenetrable monotony of cruelties over the past few years.

Finally, my deepest appreciation goes to my wife, Patti, who over the course of our marriage has shown me the best of what love can do to warm the soul. At times, I feel like nothing is ever real until I tell her about it, and far too often she has patiently lent her ear and heart to the innumerable trials and tribulations that go with writing, and selling, a book. Thanks, Patti, for the steadfast support and encouragement over the years!

March 29, 2002

In addition to the people acknowledged above (who are no less important to this edition than they were to the first), the second edition has benefited substantially from the dozens of colleges, universities, professional conferences, and public venues at which I've been graciously asked to speak about my work since the appearance of the first edition. I'm deeply indebted to the wonderful hospitality shown me during those visits as well as, and most important, the myriad ways in which audiences challenged me with hard questions and helped sharpen my thinking on so many issues in this book.

There is another, more distant, audience that deserves equal thanks—the students, professionals, and laypeople who read the first edition and took time out of busy schedules to contact me with critiques (almost always constructive), questions, encouragement, and clarifications. Writing can be a solitary

experience, but it is made much less so when the people for whom the work is intended respond with enough urgency and intensity to affirm the collective importance of developing an understanding of how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing. While all of the names are too numerous to mention, and I would almost certainly leave out many who should be included, I am especially grateful to my new friend in Israel, Olek Netzer, who continues his work to heal a divided society; Gregory Stanton, president of Genocide Watch and the coordinator of the International Campaign to End Genocide, a steady voice of conscience who bears well the human rights legacy of his ancestor Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and Steven Baum, Peter Suedfeld, Wendy Lower, Barry Gomberg, Joyce Apsel, Shana Levin, Ervin Staub, Barlow Der Mugrdechian, and Al Howsepian, all of whom have been timely sources of encouragement at particular points along the way. Their contributions, and those of many unnamed others in both editions, remind me how few of the ideas in the pages to follow are mine.

Also influential immediately after the release of the first edition was a seminar I led at Whitworth College for college faculty from around the country during the summer of 2002. The month-long seminar, titled "Deliver Us from Evil: Genocide and the Christian World" and funded by the Lilly Fellows Program in the Humanities and the Arts, let me teach—and learn much more from—some of the most engaging minds and compassionate hearts I have known. Thanks here go to each of the participants—Gary Bailey, Brad Beach, Blaine David Benedict, Khanh-Van Bui, Richard Grassel, Elizabeth Groppe, Timothy Horner, Susan Nelson, Bruce Reichenbach, Mark Ruff, Fred Shepherd, and Christian van Gorder—as well as to the invited seminar facilitators and guest speakers—Victoria Barnett, Stephen Haynes, Laurie Lamon, and John Yoder.

In addition, I had the great fortune to be part of an "Interpreting Testimony" research team at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., for two weeks during the summer of 2003. I'm greatly indebted to the other participants on the team for the rigor and clarity they brought to our daily discussions—Valerie Hebert, Hilary Earl, Samuel Kassow, Simone Gigliotti, Steve Carr, and Alan Rosen. Central to facilitating our time were our wonderful hosts at the museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Robert Ehrenreich and Ellen Blalock.

A special word of appreciation goes to the research assistants at Whitworth who collected and collated the most recent materials for the revisions and updates—Jenene Sadlick and Joel Gaffney—as well as those who as-

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As with the first edition, I cannot imagine a more supportive and author-friendly publisher than Oxford University Press. Special thanks go to Joan Bossert (again), Christi Stanforth (again), Rudy Faust, Jessica Sonnenschein, Nancy Hoagland, Abby Gross, and Norm Hirschy. I know mine wasn't the only book on their to-do list, but they always made me feel like it was.

Finally, although they were already acknowledged in the first edition, I'd be terribly remiss were I not to again acknowledge my family for their patience and support over the course of the work on this second edition. When I look at their pictures that envelop my office desk, computer monitor, and shelves, I am daily reminded of the ways in which their love envelops my soul.

March 31, 2006 J. W.
Spokane, Washington

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I

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF EXTRAORDINARY HUMAN EVIL?

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Introduction: A Place Called Mauthausen

August 1992

While a visiting professor at the Catholic University in Eichstatt, Germany, I took a Saturday train from nearby Munich to the small Austrian town of Mauthausen, an idyllic market community that lies just fourteen miles east of Linz and nuzzles peacefully along the north bank of the Danube. In the evocative description by historian Gordon J. Horwitz, it "sits amid lovely rolling hills whose fields cover the Austrian landscape like the bedspread of a giant."[1]

Less than three miles from the town's center, however, stands a reminder of one of the most brutal chapters in human history. There, in a moral interruption of the Austrian landscape, is the hilltop site of a former Nazi concentration camp. Portions of the thick granite walls of the camp—8 feet high and 462 yards around—are immediately visible. Compared to other Holocaust sites, the Mauthausen camp draws relatively few visitors. Although Austrian schoolchildren make a compulsory trip, it remains a place whose story is not widely known.

From 1938 to 1945, Mauthausen was the central Nazi concentration camp for all of Austria. Unlike the extermination camps in the former Polish territory—Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and Majdanek—Mauthausen was not a killing center specifically designed to carry out genocide. Rather, Mauthausen was a labor camp that, early on, was primarily a place in which inmates mined the rich resources of the local granite for the SS, the elite corps of the Nazi Party. Here, in an imposing and frightful pit whose walls rose some 300 feet in height, the inmates worked up to eleven hours per day, shouldering heavy blocks of stone. The Mauthausen quarry birthed hundreds of thousands of such stones for streets, monuments, and buildings throughout

Hitler's Germany. After 1943, most Mauthausen prisoners were reassigned to work for the military industry in the region—principally in the construction of subterranean tunnels to house factories for rocket assembly and production of plane parts. As a result, the Mauthausen complex eventually comprised a network of forty-nine satellite camps extending across the length and breadth of prewar Austrian territory.

In its beginning, Mauthausen was a depository for German and Austrian criminals and "asocial elements." Over time, however, there was a rapid expansion and diversification of the inmate population. Political prisoners (Jews, communists, and intellectuals), prisoners of war from territories occupied by the advancing German armies (Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France), and those in "protective custody" were added to the inmate rolls. In January 1941, Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Security Police and Security Service, devised a classificatory scheme in which he divided the "non-killing camps" into three categories of ascending severity. Only Mauthausen, and its subsidiary camp of Gusen, were placed in the most severe category. The most dangerous, threatening, and "unreformable" inmates were assigned to Mauthausen.

In truth, though, Mauthausen's severity existed long before Heydrich's official sanction. Beginning with the outbreak of war in the late summer of 1939, Mauthausen developed a reputation as a center for the torture and murder of its inmates. To the raucous cries of "Attention! Parachutists!," for example, SS men stationed around the rim of the stone quarry would hurl prisoners off the edge to their deaths. Others encouraged prisoners to go beyond the wire to pick fruit, shooting these "raspberry picker details" for amusement.

As time went on, the cruelty could be counted in the soaring death rates. In 1939, the camp recorded a death toll of 445. In 1941, Mauthausen reported an inmate mortality rate of 58 percent, compared with 36 percent at Dachau and 19 percent at Buchenwald. In June of that year, 348 Dutch Jews arrived at Mauthausen. Three weeks later, not a single one of them was still alive. In 1942, the death toll had risen to 14,293. In that same year, the camp forwarded to Berlin eleven and a half pounds of dental gold torn from the mouths of its victims. From January to April 1943, 5,147 more perished. The first five months of 1945 saw Mauthausen reach its inmate peak of 84,500 and also saw 52,814 die. In all, it is conservatively estimated that more than 200,000 prisoners passed through Mauthausen. It is believed that at least 119,000 of them died, of whom 38,120 were Jews.

Mauthausen was the last camp to be liberated by the Allies. At its lib-

eration on May 5, 1945, the main camp was a scene of unimaginable horror. Severe overcrowding and reduced food rations had hastened the death of many. In the camp hospital, cases of cannibalism were documented. The crematoria could not burn all the decaying corpses. Shallow mass graves only barely concealed thousands of others. One member of the liberating forces wrote home: "It is really the smell that makes a visit to a death camp stark reality. The smell and the stink of the dead and dying, the smell and the stink of the starving. Yes, it is the smell, the odor of the death camp that makes it burn in the nostrils and memory. I will always smell Mauthausen."[2]

Mauthausen was clearly the harshest of the "non-killing camps." In all, there were fewer than 18,000 survivors on the day of liberation. (One of those was the future Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal.) Since the liberation of Mauthausen came during the same week as the surrender of Germany, however, it was little noticed in the press. It has never become the symbol of human evil that is now synonymous with the names of Dachau, Flossenburg, Bergen-Belsen, and Buchenwald. Yet, for sheer brutality, it may well have matched them all. And Franz Ziereis was its commandant.

June 1999

I sit in the library of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. In front of me is a picture of Franz Ziereis. I have thought of him often over the past seven years. What type of man was capable of overseeing the atrocity that was Mauthausen? In my mind's eye, I have constructed an image of a monster whose face betrayed the pure evil that lay within him, a monster for whom brutality was as much a part of his being as was the blood that pulsed through his veins.

The picture in front of me, though, contradicts all I have imagined. Ziereis stands comfortably, but not supremely, atop one of the granite walls surrounding Mauthausen. His left hand rests lightly on a stair railing. There is just the hint of a guarded smile on his face. But for the conspicuous SS uniform, he could easily be mistaken as someone's father on a weekend stroll at a local park. His soft features and elegant appearance give a disquieting truth to the nickname those closest to him preferred — "Baby Face Ziereis." The contradiction is disturbing. It would be so much easier if his physical features mirrored the cruelty that I know he oversaw and committed. There is something about his ordinariness that makes those atrocities even more unsettling. I am driven to know more about this man, primarily in the hope

Franz Ziereis, commandant of Mauthausen from August 1939 to May 1945. Photo (taken between 1939 and 1945) by Andras Tsagatakis, courtesy of USHMM Photo Archives.

of discovering something that exposes the violent nature hidden by his innocent exterior.

Born of a working family in Munich on August 13, 1905, Ziereis had two sisters, one older than he, and a younger brother. His father, killed in the First World War when Ziereis was eleven years old, drove a horse-drawn cart. Though Franz Ziereis described himself as a merchant and carpenter by profession, he was, in reality, a career soldier. When just over eighteen years old, he enrolled in the Nineteenth Bavarian Infantry Regiment of the Reichswehr (the regular German army), in which he remained until September 1936. Lacking a high school diploma, he had no real chance of ever becoming an army officer. Shortly after he was discharged, however, he was offered a job as a training officer in the Waffen-SS with the rank of first lieutenant and opportunities for advancement. Ziereis accepted the offer without hesitation and joined the Nazi Party. He won quick praise for his abilities as a training officer and was promoted to Hauptsturmführer (captain). He arrived as commandant of Mauthausen in August 1939. In 1941 he was promoted to Sturmbannführer (major), in 1943 to Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant colonel), and in 1944 to Standartenführer (colonel).

Ziereis's personal and military history does not show that he possessed any particularly outstanding leadership skills or abilities. Nor did he have an

above-average intelligence. Even Ziereis himself saw his rapid career advancement as a "payoff" from Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, for agreeing to remain as camp commandant rather than being transferred to the front lines of the war—a transfer that the would-be hero (or martyr) claimed he requested often (though his personnel file contains no record of such requests). Those who knew him spoke of him as a model husband and a devoted father. In short, he was as ordinary as ordinary gets, with one singular exception: his seemingly boundless capacity for brutality.

How brutal was he? Ziereis, the dutiful father, was reputed to give prisoners to his young son for live target practice. He admitted taking part in the shooting of other prisoners because, in his opinion, "the new SS troops shot bad [*sic*] from the small fire arms."[3] To facilitate his own skill, he would sometimes stand on a convenient vantage point from which to view a newly arrived transport and select random prisoners as targets for his own shooting practice. He admitted to frequently driving the infamous gas vans in which carbon monoxide exhaust fumes were routed back into the cargo area to kill prisoners. He also personally participated in the beating and execution of scores of prisoners. Other commandants at subcamps under his command tanned the tattooed skin from victims' bodies for use as bookbindings, lampshades, and leather satchels. Ziereis refrained only because Berlin quickly forbade the practice. Shortly before liberation, he had planned to follow orders to gather all of the thousands of remaining prisoners at Mauthausen, assemble them in the subterranean tunnels, and blow them up with twenty-four tons of dynamite. Later, on his deathbed, Ziereis would maintain that he refused these orders—primarily under his wife's influence. In reality, though, it was only the arrival of the American forces on May 5, 1945, that prevented Ziereis from enacting this horrendous mass execution.

Several days after the liberation of Mauthausen, an ex-prisoner spotted Ziereis. An American patrol was sent to apprehend him. Ziereis opened fire and in the exchange of gunfire was severely wounded. He was taken to the U.S. Army's 131st Evacuation Hospital, where he was operated on by a former inmate of Mauthausen. His wounds proved fatal, but he lingered on for several days before dying during the night of May 22–23, 1945.

I return to the photograph of Ziereis. The contradiction it raised in my mind earlier is now heightened. Ziereis is just one of the millions of weeds of extraordinary evil that strangle the field of human experience. It is easy to flinch and dismiss him as a monster, too unlike us to be understood. He reminds us, however, that—except for a small number of the architects of

the extermination process and a few sadists who enjoyed taking part in it—most of the perpetrators of the Holocaust and other cases of mass killing and genocide were extraordinary only by what they did, not by who they were. They could not be identified, a priori, as having the personalities of killers. Most were not mentally impaired. Nor were they identified as sadists at home or in their social environment. Nor were they victims of an abusive background. They defy easy demographic categorization. Among them we find educated and well-to-do people as well as simple and impoverished people. We find church-affiliated people as well as agnostics and atheists. We find people who were loving parents as well as people who had difficulty initiating and sustaining personal relationships. We find young people and old people. We find people who were not actively involved in the political or social groups responsible for institutionalizing the process of destruction as well as those who were. We find ordinary people who went to school, fought with siblings, celebrated birthdays, listened to music, and played with friends. In short, the majority of perpetrators of extraordinary evil were not distinguished by background, personality, or previous political affiliation or behavior as having been men or women unusually likely or fit to be genocidal executioners.

This reality is unsettling because it counters our general mental tendency to relate extraordinary acts to correspondingly extraordinary people. But we cannot evade this discomforting reality. We are forced to confront the ordinariness of most perpetrators of genocide and mass killing. Franz Ziereis and the countless other perpetrators of extraordinary evil throughout human history bring us face to face with questions that force us to turn a flashlight on the darkest recesses of who and what we are. As theologian Morton T. Kelsey has argued, it is hard for us to escape the pounding on the floor of our souls that comes from the cellar in which we hide the violence, hatred, and viciousness we would rather not see ourselves or let others see.[4] Is it possible to segregate the perpetration of extraordinary evil as abnormal despite its constant presence within our species? Or is it more accurate to include such evildoing in the "normal" human activity engaged in by ordinary people like you and I? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to define what we mean by the phrase "extraordinary human evil."

1

The Nature of Extraordinary Human Evil

> When we have overcome absence with phone calls, winglessness with airplanes, summer heat with air conditioning—when we have overcome all these and much more besides, then there will abide two things with which we must cope: the evil in our hearts and death.
>
> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*

IT IS EASY TO DETACH OURSELVES FROM perpetrators of extraordinary human evil and their victims. Most of us know nothing—in an experiential sense—about the perpetration of extraordinary evil. We have not been through anything in our personal lives that remotely compares to the atrocities inflicted on millions of victims of genocide and mass killing across the globe. Each of us is, though, the surviving heir of catastrophes and destruction that we never experienced. As such, we are called to find meaning where there appears to be none.

We have, due to the considerable efforts of scholars in Holocaust and genocide studies, an incredibly exhaustive account of the inhumanity we perpetrate on each other. The opening of archives throughout Eastern Europe, the emergence of primary source materials from Cambodia, Rwanda, and the former Yugoslavia, and the cultivation of oral collections from victims and perpetrators of extraordinary evil around the world continue to yield even more documentation to be translated, sorted, and analyzed.

After all of that, though, we are still left with the "big questions." One of the most urgent is how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing. Historian Saul Friedlander, who divides his time between professorships at Tel Aviv University and at UCLA, suggests that we now need the lens of psychology to bring some focus to the "incomprehensibility" of extraordinary human evil that scholars continue to document.[1] Questions of motive and the social environment in which evil is practiced must be addressed if we hope

to shed additional light on the actions of ordinary citizens doing their "jobs" in extraordinary situations.

To their credit, many scholars in the field psychologize about the origins of extraordinary human evil. Most follow the shopworn procedure of harvesting a grain of explanation from undergraduate textbook accounts of Stanley Milgram's research on obedience to authority (see chapter 4) or Philip Zimbardo's Stanford prison simulation (see chapter 7). Often, though, their reading of this research fails to bring out the rich nuances of understanding human behavior. Even more limiting is their relative unawareness of the expansive wealth of equally insightful contemporary psychological research that followed in the decades after these classic works. Despite their good intentions, most nonspecialists simply do not bring the training or experience necessary to fully mine the potential of what contemporary psychology can offer. As a result, the explanations they cull from psychology often seem too trivial and too mundane to offer a thorough understanding of extraordinary human evil.

In our search for an explanation of the origins of extraordinary human evil, it is vital that we recognize our interdependence. Regardless of disciplinary perspective, we are all students in the slow business of understanding what it means to be human and, often, what it means to be inhuman. Only in collaboration will we come to a fuller understanding of our inhumanity to each other. Only by weaving ideas from many disciplines into a cohesive tapestry will we begin to understand extraordinary human evil.

The goal of this book is to offer a psychological explanation of how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing. It is an attempt to go beyond the minutiae of thick description ("who," "what," "when," and "where") and look at the bigger questions of explanation and understanding: to know a little less and understand a little more. To begin, we must be clear about the boundaries of the investigation—exactly what do we mean by "evil" and, particularly, "extraordinary evil"?

The Nature of Evil

In virtually every human culture, there has existed some word for "evil," a linguistic acknowledgment of its reality in everyday human affairs. For millennia, the concept of evil was central to religious, and much secular, thought. Events in the twentieth century, particularly two world wars and the horrors of the Holocaust, kept the universal reality of evil on the front

pages. Indeed, it was a time in history that led philosopher Hannah Arendt to declare, "The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe."[2] Her prediction, though, was not quite right. For most of the twentieth century, evil remained an unpopular concept among intellectuals in Europe — and those around the world as well. As philosopher Susan Neiman points out, "No major philosophical work but Arendt's own appeared on the subject [of evil] in English, and German and French texts were remarkably oblique."[3]

So despite its universality in human affairs, "evil" is not a frequently studied construct with a generally accepted definition. Until recently, the concept of evil also had almost completely disappeared from the vocabulary of the social sciences that seek to understand the human situation. In 1969, the eminent sociologist Kurt Wolff of Brandeis University wrote, "To my knowledge, no social scientist, as a social scientist, has asked what evil is. 'What is evil?' is a question that rather has been raised (both in the West and in the East) by philosophers and theologians, as well as by uncounted, unclassified, unrecorded people since time immemorial."[4] More than three decades later, it appeared that little had changed: a survey of psychology articles written in the previous ten years found only *nine* that were pertinent to the concept of evil.[5] The prevailing normative picture of humankind held up by the social sciences still portrayed, for the most part, rational creatures who could be expected to relate to and treat fellow humans with basic empathy, kindness, respect, and decency. Most recently, however, there are signs that the social scientific neglect of evil is beginning to be rectified. For instance, an entire 1999 issue of the *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, the official journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, was devoted to social scientific perspectives on evil and violence.[6]

But why are social scientists so late, and hesitant, in bringing their attention to such an ever-present component of everyday human life? Like many other people, social scientists have had a hard time wrapping their minds around exactly what evil is and is not. Part of this stems from the fact that it is a word that has fallen out of widespread use. Until the events of September 11, 2001, we hardly used the word "evil" in everyday conversation. Even now, for many, it seems redundant with other more often used terms. In general conversation, we easily substitute "moral wrongness" or "bad" for the term "evil" without any loss of meaning. Some see "evil" as grandiose, and others find it esoteric, mystical, or supernatural. For most of us, "evil" is simply an antiquated concept. It is a relic heavy with archaic baggage (for example, the

notion of sin). In short, though we know it from fairy tales, children's books, comic books, horror films, and Sunday school class, "evil" is a word modern folk do not often hear or use.

Even those relatively few scholars, most housed in religion and philosophy, who write frequently of evil often shy away from a precise conceptual definition. Why? To specifically define the "judgmental" and "moralistic" concept of evil seems to threaten the academic ideal of ethical and value neutrality. To be sure, any definition includes, in part, a value statement reflecting one's own perspective. As Thomas Hobbes, a seventeenth-century English philosopher, wrote, "No man calleth good or evil but that which is so in his own eyes."[7]

To be equally sure, however, this relativistic ethos has meant that evil has ceased to be a meaningful term. This definitional phobia is a convenient cop-out that keeps us mired on the sidelines of a discussion in which we should be full participants. Though evil may be difficult to define conceptually, we all are aware of its existence and pervasiveness at a concrete level. We know what it looks like, what it feels like, and how it can irrevocably alter our lives. As the late Susan Sontag said, "We have a sense of evil," but we no longer have "the religious or philosophical language to talk intelligently about evil."[8]

Most would agree that—in its broadest sense—evil is anything detrimental to the well-being of living things. Following that, we can then distinguish between the two most common categories of evil: natural and human (sometimes called "moral") evil. Natural evil is a function of natural processes of change. It is the evil that originates independently of human actions—events such as earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, fires, pestilence, droughts, and diseases. In late August 2005, Hurricane Katrina—demolishing much of the Gulf Coast region of the United States and leaving in its wake catastrophic damage and the loss of at least 1,836 people—painfully reminded us that natural evil can cause devastating harm, though without conscious or unconscious intention. Human evil, in contrast, is evil that we originate. It refers to the destructive things that we do to each other and ourselves.

There is, of course, debate over the exact boundaries of these two subsidiary forms of evil. Because, for instance, human behavior is subject to genetic and physical influences, it becomes hard to strictly distinguish between natural and human evil. Other scholars argue that evil is not so readily located, that it is as much about how we experience suffering as what causes it, as much about a world that cares nothing for humans as it is about humans who care nothing for one another. Some posit a third category of evil

representing the combination of the first two—human evil using or taking advantage of natural evil. Others find evil in the humanly designed systems and structures that prevent human flourishing. Still others suggest a divine or demonic metaphysical realm of evil. Each of these is a necessary window to understanding the many facets of evil. It is to the specific question of human evil, though, that this book is addressed.

I define human evil as the deliberate harming of humans by other humans. This is a behavioral definition that focuses on how people act toward one another. This definition judges as evil any human *actions* leading to the deliberate harming of other humans. As philosopher Claudia Card has suggested, such evil tends to ruin lives, or significant parts of lives.[9]

This definition of human evil includes the creation of conditions that materially or psychologically destroy or diminish people's quality of life—their dignity, happiness, and capacity to fulfill basic material needs. Such conditions include the harming of property (for example, theft or vandalism); psychological harm from threat of physical injury, trauma, or fright; social harm from exploitation, debasement, slander, or libel; or harm that comes from the taking away of an individual's freedom (for example, invasion of privacy, kidnapping, or false imprisonment). At its extreme, the definition also includes killing that is not required for biological survival (that is, murder). In short, harm is the most salient characteristic of human evil, and it is the deliberate intentionality of harm, inflicted with reasonably foreseeable consequences, that directs our investigation.

What the definition gains in precision, it may lose in exclusions. It does not, for instance, judge evil by conscious intentions. Too often, perpetrators of evil hide their negative intentions from others (and themselves), or justify their negative actions as a necessary route to a greater good, or even defend their harmdoing as the only appropriate response to the victim's evil nature. For them, their conscious intentions are anything but evil, and they do not generally regard themselves as evil. Even intentions that are evil but do not succeed in imposing harm are excluded from this definition. Finally, neither does the definition include cases of accidental or unintended harm.

The Nature of Extraordinary Human Evil

Within the broad range of acts defined as human evil, I have chosen to focus this book on *extraordinary* human evil. This focus on human evil writ large is not about the isolated, tabloid cases of serial killers or psychopaths who go berserk in public spaces. Rather, the center of my attention is on the deliber-

ate harm we perpetrate on each other under the sanction of political, social, or religious groups — in other words, the malevolent human evil perpetrated in times of collective social unrest, war, mass killings, and genocide. I am not referring here to the deliberate harm inflicted in the course of military action against the military forces of an acknowledged enemy. Instead, I am referring to the deliberate harm inflicted against a defenseless and helpless group targeted by a political, social, or religious authority — human evil *in extremis.*

As I worked on the final revisions of the first edition of this book, I — like the rest of the world — was shocked by the events of September 11, 2001. On that day, around 2,830 defenseless victims were killed by the terrorist attacks now attributed to Osama bin Laden. This is an example of terrorism "from below," that is, violence motivated by grievances against, or ideologies opposed to, an existing state. As we have come to know far too well, such terrorism can cast a debilitating shadow on the human experience. In the twentieth century alone, terrorism "from below" claimed approximately 500,000 lives. Generally, however, it is terrorism "from above" — state-directed terrorism imposed on its own citizens — that is the larger contributor to human suffering.[10]

Scholars use two terms to classify the collective violence stemming from state-directed terrorism. *Mass killing* means killing members of a group without the intention to eliminate the whole group or killing large numbers of people without a precise definition of group membership. Collective violence becomes *genocide* when a specific group is systematically and intentionally targeted for destruction.

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jewish émigré and noted scholar who taught law at Yale and Duke Universities, first coined the term "genocide" in 1944.[11] Since that time, there has been an ongoing debate about how, exactly, genocide ought to be defined. On December 9, 1948, after lengthy discussion and ample political compromise, Article II of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted and specifically defined genocide as "acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" by killing members of the group, causing them serious bodily or mental harm, creating conditions calculated to bring about their physical destruction, preventing births, or forcibly transferring children to another group. For a variety of reasons (most notably the exclusion of political, social, and gender groups) the UN definition of genocide has been less than satisfactory for many scholars and jurists. As a result, it is not surprising that over the years the heat of definitional controversy has only intensified.

Without controversy, however, is the fact that the human reality of mass killing and genocide predated its semantic taxonomy. Aptly dubbed the "Age of Genocide," the past century saw a massive scale of systematic and intentional mass murder coupled with an unprecedented efficiency of the mechanisms and techniques of mass destruction. On the historical heels of the physical and cultural genocide of American Indians during the nineteenth century, the twentieth century writhed from the near-complete annihilation of the Hereros by the Germans in South-West Africa in 1904; to the brutal assault on the Armenian population by the Turks between 1915 and 1923; to the implementation of a Soviet man-made famine against the Ukrainian Kulaks in 1932–1933 that left several million peasants starving to death; to the extermination of two-thirds of Europe's Jews during the Holocaust of 1939–1945; to the massacre of approximately half a million people in Indonesia during 1965–1966; to mass killings and genocide in Bangladesh (1971), Burundi (1972), Cambodia (1975–1979), East Timor (1975–1979), and Rwanda (1994); and, finally, to the conflict that continues to plague the former Yugoslavia. All told, it is estimated that at least 60 million men, women, and children were victims of genocide and mass killing in the past century alone.[12]

In this book, my focus is *not* on analyzing the macro-level political, economic, and historical factors that underlie the origins of genocide and mass killing in a given society. Understanding the large-scale pressures that animate collective violence is, obviously, an important issue. Fortunately, much good work has been, and continues to be, done by the historians and political scientists who unpack the myriad macro-level antecedents of genocide and mass killing.

Ironically, we know more about the broad mechanics of mass murder than we do about the mind-set of people who carried it out. So my focus is on the micro-level issue of who actually carries out the killings. History makes clear that political, social, or religious groups wanting to commit mass murder do. Though there may be other obstacles, they are never hindered by a lack of willing executioners. That is the one constant on which they can count. Ultimately, genocide and mass killing happen only because individual human beings kill other human beings in large numbers and over an extended period of time. How are people enlisted to perpetrate such extraordinary evil?

Unlike much of the research on perpetrator behavior, I am not interested in the higher echelons of leadership who structured the ideology, policy, and initiatives behind a particular genocide or mass killing. Nor am I inter-

ested in the middle-echelon perpetrators, the faceless bureaucrats who made implementation of those initiatives possible. Rather, I am interested in the rank-and-file killers, the soldiers, police, militia (paramilitary), and civilians at the bottom of the hierarchy who personally carried out the millions of executions. These people were so ordinary that, with few exceptions, they were readily absorbed into civil society after the killings and peacefully lived out their otherwise unremarkable lives—attesting to the unsettling reality that genocide overwhelms justice.

How many people does it take to commit mass murder? Precise numbers are impossible to come by, but Holocaust scholars estimate that 100,000 to 500,000 killers took part in the Final Solution.[13] More recently, in Rwanda, as many as 75,000 to 210,000 Hutus participated in the slaughter of at least 800,000 Tutsis in just a hundred days. Some Rwandans even maintain that the actual number of perpetrators ran as high as between 1 and 3 million (many of the killings involved groups of people attacking one victim).[14] One point stands clear: to understand the fundamental reality of mass murder we need to shift our focus from impersonal institutions and abstract structures to the actors, the men and women who actually carried out the atrocities.

You could argue that I am guilty of emphasizing the grandiosity and abstractness of evil by focusing the book's attention on the commission of extraordinary human evil. I do recognize that human evil is ubiquitous and that for many of us—especially before September 11—our most direct experiences with evil are the petty cruelties and minor transgressions of everyday life. To be sure, there may be immense value in focusing our attention on everyday evil. It is more common, more is known about it, and it can be studied more easily. Perhaps learning about how people cheat, you could argue, can tell us something about how people commit genocide and mass killing.

While that may be true, I believe that there is just as much to learn about everyday evil from looking at the extremes of human behavior. Knowing the basics of everyday atmospheric physics, for example, does give us insight into an extraordinary atmospheric event, like a tornado. Studying the physics of tornadoes, though, also gives us a great deal of information about the basics of more everyday atmospheric patterns, like thunderstorms. The extraordinary event—be it a tornado or a human atrocity—is so clear, so exaggerated, and so urgent that it often drives us to a deeper understanding of the ordinary. Over the course of this book, you will see that the causal processes involved in the commission of extraordinary evil will have something in common with the type of everyday evil that you and I commonly

commit. In the final analysis, though, the pervasive reality of extraordinary evil offers its own defense for studying it. Unfortunately, extraordinary evil, like a tornado, happens often enough—and is disastrous enough—to merit study for its own sake.

Understanding Evil: A Slippery Slope

I want to recognize two legitimate fears that lie beneath any attempt to understand extraordinary human evil. For many, these fears make any explanation intrinsically controversial and, for some, unacceptable. *The first is the fear that to explain the behaviors of perpetrators of extraordinary evil is to justify those behaviors.* In other words, explanation inevitably leads to condoning, pardoning, and forgiving, or—at the very least—a shift in the direction of a more favorable attitude toward the perpetrator. This is why some argue that, rather than studying human evil, we should simply recognize it for what it is and condemn it. For instance, Bruno Bettelheim, a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, has written: "I restricted myself to trying to understand the psychology of the prisoners and I shied away from trying to understand the psychology of the SS—because of the ever-present danger that understanding fully may come close to forgiving. I believe there are acts so vile that our task is to reject and prevent them, not to try to understand them empathetically."[15]

Similarly, the protagonist of Bernhard Schlink's best-selling novel, *The Reader*, says: "I wanted simultaneously to understand Hanna's crime and to condemn it. But it was too terrible for that. When I tried to understand it, I had the feeling I was failing to condemn it as it must be condemned. When I condemned it as it must be condemned, there was not room for understanding. . . . I wanted to pose myself both tasks—understanding and condemnation. But it was impossible to do both."[16]

Is it really impossible to pose ourselves both tasks of understanding and condemnation? Must one rule out the other? A recent intriguing social psychological experiment by Arthur G. Miller and his colleagues from Miami University in Ohio contends that there *is* ample reason to fear that understanding can promote forgiving. In three experiments designed to explore the exonerating effects of explanations, Miller and his team found "that there are a variety of cognitive and affective processes that, in fact, may produce a relatively condoning attitude toward perpetrators as a result of explaining their actions."[17] Even after a brief exposure to explanations, participants evidenced a significant judgmental shift in the direction of a less harsh or punitive

orientation toward a perpetrator. The Miller studies found that social psychological explanations, in particular, ran the risk of reducing the perceived intentionality and responsibility attributed to perpetrators.

Why do our explanations move us closer to justification, forgiveness, or exoneration? In part, because we see explanation only in purely deterministic terms. That is, when we explain a behavior, it is as if the person had no choice but to engage in that particular behavior, and, thus, the behavior is justifiable. In reality, though, only pseudoscience deals in such "certainties." Psychological explanations, when presented responsibly and legitimately, are more probabilistic than deterministic. In other words, they tell us what we are *most likely* to do rather than what we *must* do. Perhaps by knowing the social forces surrounding us, for example, we can indeed develop a reasonable understanding of our capacity to commit extraordinary evil. This is not to maintain, though, that we are *forced* to commit that evil. Yes, we are certainly influenced by the constraints of our general culture and a situation's context. But we are just as certainly responsible for our own initiatives in response to those influences. In other words, what perpetrators of extraordinary evil decide to do makes a great difference in what they eventually do. Within the context of our respective freedom, we all are responsible for our deeds—evil or otherwise.

We must continually remind ourselves that a psychological explanation of extraordinary human evil is not exculpatory. We must not, however unwittingly, buy into a condoning image of perpetrators. There are no such things as "perpetratorless" mass killings or genocides. Perpetrators are not just the hapless victims of human nature or their social context. In willfully failing to exercise their moral judgment, they retain full moral and legal accountability for the atrocities they committed. To understand all is not to forgive all. "Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving," writes Christopher Browning, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Not trying to understand the perpetrators in human terms," he continues, "would make impossible not only this study but any history of Holocaust perpetrators that sought to go beyond one-dimensional caricature."[18]

The main goal of this book is psychological understanding, not moral analysis. No one would deny that we have learned a tremendous amount about who we are, and of what the human spirit can endure, by exploring the multidimensional complexity of the victims of extraordinary human evil. It is equally appropriate to believe that there may be just as much to learn by ripping off the masks that disguise perpetrators of extraordinary evil as mon-

sters. In understanding how these ordinary people come to commit genocide and mass killing, we get a discomforting glimpse of the depths to which the human spirit can plunge.

In short, I do not want to make apologies or offer excuses for perpetrators. I do, though, want to understand the processes that produce extraordinary evil. That said, we must then supplement our psychological understanding with the courage to resume the moral condemnation of those terrible acts. As social psychologist Roy Baumeister writes, "It is a mistake to let moral condemnation interfere with trying to understand—but it would be a bigger mistake to let that understanding, once it has been attained, interfere with moral condemnation."[19] Evil is, after all, still evil, regardless of how well, or how poorly, we come to understand its origin.

The second fear is that an attempt to explain extraordinary human evil carries with it an inordinate risk of contamination. This fear tempts us to retreat to the safest, and most comfortable, way to deal with the issue—from the heights of moral condemnation rather than the depths of human understanding. At the heart of this fear is the belief that extraordinary human evil is unexplainable. To try and explain the inexplicable only puts you in a position where you will be tainted by the evil itself. I bank my life on the belief that attempting to understand evil does not mean you will become an evil person. At the very least, however, I do recognize that I run the risk of paralysis and falling into a pit of emotional apathy. This is what anthropologist Inga Clendinnen has described as the Gorgon effect—"the sickening of imagination and curiosity and the draining of the will which afflicts so many of us when we try to look squarely at the persons and processes implicated in the Holocaust."[20]

I certainly empathize with this fear. Researching and writing this book exposed me to episodes of inhumanity to which I would rather not have been exposed. It has left me more callused and less easily moved than I should be. For you, reading this book may have a similar effect. Even reduced to black marks on white paper, our inhumane treatment of other humans is enough to darken the brightest day and make uneasy the most comfortable night. You may feel hardened beyond the pull of sentiment. It may be much more difficult than you anticipate to clearly separate *them* from *us*. You will find that when we study the nature of human evil, we inevitably end up examining our own natures.

Our eyes, and hearts, will be scorched by what we see. We must not, though, let that excuse us from the hard task of trying to extract the comprehensible from the unthinkable. We must not let "evil" be a throwaway category for the things we are afraid to understand. We must not let it be the

impenetrable term we use when we come to the limit of human comprehension. We must not place human evil beyond human scrutiny. To do so is to give it the benefit of our ignorance. In this sense, our refusal to attempt to understand human evil is a willful failure to know our own hearts and, if anything, only facilitates the continuation of extraordinary evil in human affairs.

Central Argument of the Book

My central argument is that *it is ordinary people, like you and me, who commit genocide and mass killing.* This argument is difficult to admit, to understand, to absorb. We would rather know Extraordinary Evil as an extra-human capitalization. The embodiment of evil in a hideous creature called IT in Madeleine L'Engle's children's classic *A Wrinkle in Time* is just one example of our preference for knowing evil at a great distance. If we are forced to know IT in human terms, we intuitively retreat to our cognitive escape of relating extraordinary acts to correspondingly extraordinary people. We fall back on our belief that the majority of perpetrators of extraordinary human evil throughout history have indeed been extraordinary—sadists, psychopaths, and monsters. But how reasonable is it to believe that there are enough such beasts distributed throughout society to account for the litany of atrocities that has littered our history?

In reality, a purely evil person is just as much an artificial construct as a person who is purely good. Perpetrators of extraordinary evil are extraordinary only by what they have done, not by who they are. We must not consider them so irrational, so atavistic, as to be beyond human understanding. We must go beyond our tendency to focus on such evil as a peculiar property or characteristic of despicable individuals and come to focus on the ways in which ordinary individuals become perpetrators of extraordinary evil. Recognizing their ordinariness does not diminish the horror of their actions. It increases it. At the same time, it neither excuses their deeds nor minimizes the threat they pose. On the contrary, it reminds us, in Rabbi Richard L. Rubenstein's words, "how fragile are the bonds of civility and decency that keep any kind of human community from utter collapse."[21]

Part I (chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4) of the book lays out the background for my central argument that it is ordinary people, like you and me, who commit extraordinary evil. Chapters 2 and 3 acknowledge that not all scholars agree with this argument. Some maintain that the origins of extraordinary human evil lie not in ordinary individuals but in extraordinary groups, ide-

ologies, psychopathologies, or personalities. Chapter 4 reviews the work of those who argue that extraordinary evil is done by ordinary individuals who have created or activated a second self to commit that evil.

Understanding that ordinary people commit extraordinary evil still begs an explanation. *What factors lead some of us to perpetrate extraordinary evil while others of us stand by indifferently or, occasionally, resist such evil?* In other words, if we are *all* capable of extraordinary evil, why don't we *all* perpetrate extraordinary evil when given the opportunity? How, *exactly*, do ordinary people come to commit genocide and mass killing?

While the chapters in part I are useful in understanding *why* we need a unified theory of perpetrator behavior, readers interested specifically in the question of *how* ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing could proceed directly to part II (chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8). These chapters outline a general explanatory model that considers the wide range of factors involved in the process of ordinary people committing extraordinary evil. Following the methodological typology suggested by John M. Darley, a social psychologist at Princeton University, this model is based on secondary analyses of materials from which we can infer specifics about the psychological processes underlying how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing.[22] The model should, for the general reader, shed light both on how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing, and on why most people do not. For the specialist, the model should provide a theoretical and conceptual framework that can be challenged and strengthened by further primary research.

Chapter 5 lays the groundwork for the model by exploring the nature of human nature. Is there an endowment with which each of us begins our life that is important in understanding how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing? Is there a basic inborn proclivity or tendency of human nature that limits, or enables, the possibility of cooperative, caring, nonviolent relations between social groups? This chapter surveys the historical controversies surrounding these questions and presents arguments from contemporary social science supporting the possibility that there is an essentialist trait underlying our inhumanity to each other that leaves each of us, ultimately, capable of committing extraordinary evil.

Building on this understanding of human nature, the model then emphasizes three proximate, here-and-now constructions that converge interactively to impact individual behavior in situations of collective violence. Chapter 6, "The Cultural Construction of Worldview," examines the influence of cultural models—related to collectivistic values, authority orientation, and social dominance—that are widely shared by the members of a

perpetrator group. Chapter 7 explores the psychological construction of the "other," in which victims of genocide and mass killing simply become the "objects" of perpetrators' actions through the processes of us-them thinking, moral disengagement, and blaming the victims. Finally, chapter 8, "The Social Construction of Cruelty," explores the influence of professional socialization, group identification, and the binding factors of the group in creating an immediate social context in which perpetrators initiate, sustain, and cope with their cruelty.

The model is not an invocation of a single broad-brush psychological state or *event* to explain extraordinary human evil. Rather, focusing less on the outcome, it is a detailed analysis of a *process* through which the perpetrators themselves—either in committing atrocities or in order to commit atrocities—are changed. It is an overarching explanatory model that gives us a new lens through which to view the question of how ordinary people commit genocide and mass killing.

Part III (chapter 9) concludes the book by addressing the implications of my central argument and explanatory model for how we might live. I realize that my central argument and the corresponding explanatory model are not easy sells. None of us likes to be told that we are capable of committing extraordinary evil. It is a pessimistic point of view that flies directly in the face of our sincere, but misguided, optimism that human evil can be obliterated by reforming society. For some, the explanatory model will dance uncomfortably close to the borders of exoneration. For others, it will smack too much of a "how-to" primer for extraordinary evil. For most, however, the model will be a tool of inflicted self-insight as we are forced to grapple with our own propensity for evildoing in the face of our highly positive, self-serving images of who we wish ourselves to be.

I cannot let the disagreeability of these ideas lead me to turn a deaf ear to what I believe to be the truth about the origins of human evil. In my mind, the pessimism of the argument is more than countered by the realism it engenders. It is only in seeing the limits of who we are that we have a legitimate chance to structure a society in which the gross exercise of human evil is constrained. We cannot begin to command human nature except by obeying the laws under which our human nature operates. If we recognize this fact, then we need not remain helpless in the face of extraordinary evil. I contend that, ultimately, our awareness of our own capacity for evil—and of ways to cultivate the moral sensibilities that curb that capacity—is the best safeguard we can have against future genocide and mass killing.

Between each of the chapters, I have included eyewitness accounts—from

victims, perpetrators, and bystanders—of extraordinary human evil perpetrated throughout our history. These accounts—from the Americas to Armenia, from the Ukraine to East Timor, from Cambodia to Guatemala, from Rwanda to the Balkans to Darfur—offer us the broadest possible picture of our inhumanity to each other and make it exceedingly difficult to isolate extraordinary evil to any particular corner of the world or era of human history.

I do not mean for these accounts to be an impenetrable parade of cruelties that sensationalize or numb. Neither do I, in a book focused on perpetrators, use them as transparent, obligatory gestures of concern for the sufferings of the victims. After all, the underlying motivation of any book on human evil lies, primarily, in our very deep concern for past and future victims. I include the accounts simply as periodic "slaps in the face" to remind us we are dealing with a topic that is not pedestrian. In a way, to understand perpetrators of extraordinary evil is to understand how they think—in a detached, minimalist, insensitive style—about their victims. If this book does its task well, it may seem insensitive to the sufferings of victims. But the eyewitness accounts will remind us that though genocide and mass killing may be motivated by abstractions, they are not abstract. These compelling narratives allow us to make the human connections—with victims, perpetrators, and bystanders—that lie at the root of all understanding. They tell us that the study of human evil should be objective but must never become dispassionate. It is a flesh-and-bones issue with flesh-and-bones consequences. Too much detachment will only exacerbate our sense of helplessness. In this, it is right not to let our own revulsion slip away.

On a related note, much of the material with which I make my arguments is drawn from the best-documented genocide of this past century—the Holocaust. Of all the cases of mass killing and genocide throughout human history, the Holocaust represents, by far, the largest body of academic scholarship and popular writing that we have. As reflected in part I, it is the singular genocide with which most previous interpretations of extraordinary evil have been concerned. That does not mean, however, that we should restrict our understanding to this one exemplar of extraordinary evil. To do so would be to unnecessarily constrain our investigation. In parts II and III of the book, particularly the chapters detailing my explanatory model of extraordinary human evil, I have attempted to avoid this constraint by incorporating material from a variety of other cases of genocide and mass killing over the past two hundred years.

So here it begins. I presume that you are reading this because you desire a closer look at the problem of extraordinary human evil. You hope that some blinding insight, flicker of self-knowledge, or clue about how to live in this world will come out of these pages. As we explore the topic together, however, we may find that there are clear limits to our capacity for understanding extraordinary human evil. Our questions may bring us not to definitive answers but only to endless follow-up questions. Our inquiry may be a point of departure, rather than a point of arrival. After all, our understanding of our fellow humans, and ourselves, can never be complete. Those limits will be discovered, though, only at the end of inquiry, not before it begins. We have an obligation to proceed *as if* it were possible to understand and to see our inquiry through to the end.